

The Otherness of Ferocity in Theological Narratives: "The Case of the Mu'tazila"

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Abstract

The relationship between the self and the other has constituted a fundamental issue that has opened avenues for study and research from multiple perspectives and fields. This has been the case since the "other" took shape as a counterpart to the self, participating in social existence, sharing geography, language, culture, customs, and religion. However, upon deeper contemplation, this relationship appears to take two forms: one where the other coexists with the self (the non-self) within its own group, and another where the other is an outsider. This strangeness becomes even more ferocious and brutal when it falls within the realm of religion, belief, and faith—where the other differs from the self in creed and doctrine. In response, the self mobilizes all means of oppression and tyranny. This study aims to explore this phenomenon within the Islamic sphere, particularly in the field of theology, with a focus on the rationalist and freedom-seeking Mu'tazila. All Islamic sects have framed their experiences within a dialectical path between the theologian and his opponent, centering truth and salvation exclusively within their own doctrinal principles without acknowledging any shared or distributed ownership of these concepts among different sects. This is evident in the history of Mu'tazilite philosophy. The theologian dedicated himself entirely to the consensus of his sect, living and dying according to its principles. He was thus shaped by a policy of exclusion and a logic of doctrinal antagonism, narrowing the scope of salvation as much as he narrowed the definition of truth. Each sect constructed a central image of God, leading to conflicting representations: behind each image stood a group appointing itself as its defender—believing themselves to be the sole proprietors of God and the homeland, as Ali Harb puts it. This dynamic eroded the possibilities of objective and humane dialogue, undermined the values of otherness, and left no room for the "other" except as an adversary in an ongoing polemical struggle. Thus, a theological narrative emerged that was less concerned with intellectual production and more focused on rejecting, accusing, and discrediting opponents, as well as attacking the doctrinal records of rival sects. The subconscious of the theologian sought a singular approach to invoking and interpreting the text, adopting a specific mode of engaging with reason and its propositions. In this framework, the one God, worshipped in the heavens, corresponded to a single worshipping

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sect on earth, embodying the pure doctrine. Plurality was deemed ugly, diversity was condemned, and variety was considered an evil in the religion of the One Lord, the One Creed, the One Messenger, and the One Qur'an. This was the God of the theologians—one whose sternness concealed his smile and whose punishment preceded his mercy. The theologian did not excuse his opponents but rather denied them, refusing to see their differing perspectives as legitimate expressions of diverse visions of truth. Instead, he viewed them as temporary deviations that needed to be marginalized and displaced from their intellectual ground to another.

Keywords: Theology, Mu'tazila, Otherness, The Other, Takfir.

Introduction

If the sword and spear had demolished the fortresses and strongholds of the enemies of religion, then theology ('ilm al-Kalām), as history attests, defended the creed of Muslims relentlessly against any transgression, distortion, or falsification of the sacred foundations of faith. However, instead of swords and arrows, it wielded reason and its arguments, logic, and its syllogisms. Thus, its battlefield was the realm of doctrine and faith.

In this way, an intricate argumentative image emerged, depicting theological debates between scholars and their adversaries. Divergent theological stances and fundamentally opposing theses took shape, despite all of them being based on the infallible text—whether the Qur'an or the Sunnah—through interpretation and reasoning. Different theological sects thus established their doctrinal references, each embracing the banner of the "saved sect" (*al-firqa al-nājiya*). This exclusivist term evolved into a monopolistic concept that pronounced judgments of disbelief, heresy, and deviation upon dissenters. It frequently appeared in theological literature, driving scholars to compose fervent defensive narratives against those who deviated from the orthodoxy of the group holding firmly to the path of the pious predecessors (*al-salaf*) and the way of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Consequently, the concept of the "saved sect" became foundational, resembling the notion of the "chosen people of God" among the Hebrews.

This "other" came to represent a sharp opposition that countered and threatened the theological self, whether this other belonged to the same faith (within Islam) or was outside it. The theologian would hurl accusations and denunciations at anyone who opposed or failed to support him. All forms of difference were swiftly suppressed, deemed a necessary evil that had to be eradicated. Plurality and diversity were tolerated in all matters—except in doctrine. The sword and the pen whispered in unison, leading to bloodshed, the violation of sanctities, and the usurpation of rights for any dissenter or rebel against the beliefs of the collective. The burden of difference weighed so heavily upon them that they regarded it as an enemy of the Sharia and a war against religion. The space for freedom contracted when the political institution was wedded to the religious institution, giving rise to ideological camps that were fanatical and ready to respond to the calls of violence, nationalism, and theological dogma (*al-madūna al-kalāmiyya*).

The Mu'tazila, despite being champions of reason and inquiry and advocates of free will rather than determinism, were not exempt from this reality. Thus, we pose the following questions:

- How did the Mu'tazila engage with theological and doctrinal others, given their advocacy for freedom of choice?
- Did dissenting from one of their fundamental principles lead to *takfīr* (declaring someone a disbeliever) or *tafsīq* (declaring someone morally corrupt) in Mu'tazilite thought?
- Did the Mu'tazilite notion of freedom ensure doctrinal and sectarian democracy?

1. The Discourse of Schism, the Birth of Sectarian Division, and Theological Conflict

The Qur'an and the Sunnah affirm the duality of the believer and the disbeliever as a justified and legitimate distinction to differentiate truth from falsehood and the saved from the doomed. When God chose Islam as the religion for humankind, He sent His final messenger to convey the abrogating Sharia and provide Muslims with a fundamental source of beliefs and rituals—the infallible and definitive text, whether the Qur'an or the Sunnah.

However, since the Qur'an contains both clear (*muhkamāt*) and ambiguous (*mutashābihāt*) verses, numerous questions arose, not to mention verses that seem to imply anthropomorphism or predestination. During the lifetime of the Prophet (peace be upon him), divine revelation provided the answers, resolving doubts and silencing disputes, as the heavens guaranteed the final word.

Yet, after the Prophet's death, ensuing events exposed disagreements and conflicts, bringing forth issues that had previously remained latent—or had been unconsciously suppressed by Muslims—such as the question of *imāma* (leadership), divine decree (*qadā' wa-qadar*), and the nature of divine speech. Since all Muslims regarded the infallible text as their primary reference, disputes arose over how to interpret its verses and whether exegesis and allegorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*) were permissible. However, the matter did not stop at intellectual debate—swords were drawn, voices thundered, and wars erupted.

Politics became the catalyst for an overwhelming bloodstained conflict. The greatest schism within the ummah was over leadership (*imāma*), as no sword in Islam was unsheathed for a religious cause as frequently as it was for this issue, in every era. The floodgates were thus opened for interpretations, factionalism surged, and the flames of sectarianism and fanaticism burned fiercely, transforming allegiances from tribal affiliations to doctrinal convictions.

Thus, a state of fragmentation and division broke the back of the once-unified Islamic nation of the Prophet's era, splitting it into warring sects and rivaling schools of thought, each excommunicating and cursing the others. Every group regarded itself as the sole representative of the religion and the exclusive bearer of the qualities of the "saved sect" foretold by the Prophet (peace be upon him). This drove us to shed light on the logic of thought and practice in the

relationships between Islamic sects, all of which claim to seek unity. It also raises the question of how theologians dealt with those who differed from them in creed or certain doctrinal details, especially after believing themselves to be the representatives of the victorious, pure sect, possessing the correct understanding of the religion and monopolizing absolute religious truth that rejects plurality and diversity. This marked the beginning of an exclusionary, sectarian mentality, portraying itself as the ultimate heir to the Prophet and his companions. Fortunate are those who follow it, and wretched are those who turn away from it.

One of the most ideologically exploited hadiths in the matter of sectarian exclusion within Islamic doctrines is the hadith of the "saved sect." The spirit of excommunication (takfir) has overpowered theological practices and doctrinal debates, as the sectarian theological approach is inherently exclusive and classificatory: one is either a saved believer or a doomed disbeliever. Consequently, the science of theology, originally intended to defend the creed, turned into a defense of the assumptions and dogmas of sects, championing their positions and compelling opponents to accept their claims. Each sect sought to claim the title of the "saved sect" in theological debates, relegating its opponents to the seventy-two sects that were allegedly doomed to eternal destruction.

Every sect established a definitive doctrine, worked to preserve it, called for adherence to it, and trained its followers in absolute loyalty to its principles. It also mandated the condemnation and exclusion of anyone who opposed its tenets, challenged its core beliefs, or introduced ideas that could unsettle its adherents. Religious truth was considered a fixed achievement determined by scholarly efforts, where theologians and jurists defined the parameters of correct belief and set boundaries for research and debate. This rendered any innovation unacceptable, regardless of whether its proponent claimed it was rooted in the Quran, the Sunnah, reason, or reality.

Based on this premise, it is often observed in theological writings that an argument, even if supported by the Quran, Sunnah, or reason, is rejected simply because it contradicts the consensus of that particular sect's scholars and theologians. The hadith of the "saved sect" was thus taken as a sacred foundation for entrenching a culture of excommunication (takfir) and moral condemnation (tafsiq) among proponents of sectarian polemics. It became a spiritual constitution deeply ingrained in the hearts of sectarians, justifying the exclusion of opponents and dissenters.

This is evident in the narration of Abdullah ibn Amr: *"Abu Abdullah Ahmad ibn Al-Hasan ibn Abdul-Jabbar As-Sufi reported: Al-Haytham ibn Khārijā narrated to us, saying: Ismā'īl ibn 'Ayyāsh narrated from 'Abdur-Rahmān ibn Ziyād ibn An'am from 'Abdullāh ibn Yazīd from 'Abdullāh ibn Amr that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'There will come upon my nation what came upon the Children of Israel. The Children of Israel were divided into seventy-two sects, and my nation will be divided into seventy-three—one more than them—all of*

whom will be in Hell except one.' They asked, 'Who is that one group?' He replied, 'What I and my companions are upon.'"

This hadith has appeared in numerous sectarian treatises, fueling intense theological debate, polemics, and ideological disputes among the various sects. Each sect scrutinized its opponents, dissecting their arguments, and branding rival groups as heretical or misguided. As a result, hardly any sect can be found whose followers do not consider others to be in error or even outright heretics.

The guardians of doctrine adopted a binary logical framework: either one accepts their beliefs, or they are deemed a disbeliever. There is no middle ground between their ideology and its opposite. Since truth, in their view, is singular and indivisible, it must be concentrated in one party and one specific sect. Every sect claims exclusive possession of this truth, refusing to acknowledge any shared legitimacy with others.

Each group glorifies its own scholars, exalts its foundational principles, and boasts of its chain of transmission, all while diminishing and condemning the beliefs of others. This sectarian narcissism results in the wholesale dismissal of the other, as each group monopolizes the concept of the "straight path," declaring itself the sole possessor of righteousness. This phenomenon embodies the ultimate theological authoritarianism, where theologians become the self-appointed spokespersons of divine will.

One of the common errors among competitors in any field is the belief that self-affirmation can only be achieved through the negation of the other. This is an incorrect approach that often leads only to the accumulation of resentment. Unfortunately, it is frequently observed among sectarian theological factions.

3. The Mu'tazila and the Texts of Blood: From Freedom of Choice to the Compulsion of Belief

The Mu'tazila is one of the most significant Islamic sects that embraced rationalist theology (*kalām*), defending the faith and safeguarding the doctrine of monotheism (*tawhīd*). The importance of Mu'tazilite thought lies in its exemplary embodiment of rationalism within an Islamic framework, employing reason as a method of proof and argumentation in theological matters.

"Thus, reason was the first principle in Mu'tazilite thought. Reason has no meaning if it is not free, so the Mu'tazila liberated it and permitted it to explore not only human affairs but also the unseen and cosmic matters. They entrusted reason with everything and followed it to the ultimate limits of systematic, methodical inquiry."

There have been many accounts and opinions regarding the origins of the Mu'tazila, as well as the name associated with them. However, we cannot delve into these in detail here, as our research focuses on examining the foundations of Mu'tazilite thinking and investigating their methodology of excommunication (*takfīr*) and exclusion. What was the fate of those who opposed

or dissented from their beliefs? What became of "the other" in the eyes of those who championed reason and freedom?

The Mu'tazila established doctrinal principles upon which their followers were expected to unite, considering them essential requirements for entering the fold of Mu'tazilism—the path of the "saved sect" and the bearer of the doctrine of salvation:

"Mu'tazilite scholars agree on five fundamental principles. No one is considered Mu'tazilite unless they believe in all of them."

Undoubtedly, the final formulation of Mu'tazilite doctrine was preceded by disputes, controversies, and debates with other sects. These culminated in the establishment of five core principles, which became sacred in the sect's history and were treated as axioms to be taught to future generations—central tenets of theological discourse, much like the testimony of faith (*shahāda*) in Islam:

"The Mu'tazila as a whole adhere firmly to these principles, debate them rigorously, and have written numerous books refuting their opponents. They disown anyone who disagrees with them, even if they are their own fathers, sons, brothers, or kin."

Thus, anyone inquiring about the fundamentals of this religion would not be misled, for within these principles lies the comprehensive framework upon which the Islamic faith is built. Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār states:

"If someone asks, 'Tell me the fundamental doctrines that one must know in the principles of religion,' the answer is: The principles of religion are five: monotheism, divine justice, promise and threat, the intermediate position, and enjoining good while forbidding evil. These principles form the foundation of religion."

A close connection existed between adherence to these principles and acquiring the status of a Mu'tazilite. These principles served as theoretical frameworks representing and articulating the sect's beliefs. They constituted the foundation of faith, and Mu'tazilite followers were deeply committed to them throughout their theological discourse.

The Mu'tazila made these principles a decisive criterion for distinguishing between the pious and the wicked, drawing a clear boundary between a believer striving for salvation and an infidel destined for destruction. They excommunicated (*takfīr*), denounced as innovators (*tabdīl*), and deemed morally corrupt (*tafsīq*) anyone who rejected these principles or challenged any of their subsequent doctrines:

"There is no doubt that our opponents can be classified within these five principles. Do you not see that the differences of atheists, deniers, materialists, and anthropomorphists fall under the issue of monotheism? The totality of the determinists' (jabrīyya) dispute falls under divine justice. The controversy with the Murji'a pertains to promise and threat. The Kharijites' divergence falls under the

intermediate position. And the Imāmites' disagreement lies in the principle of enjoining good and forbidding evil."

Each of these principles emerged from theological disputes with a specific sect that upheld a particular doctrine on faith and belief. Any doctrinal statement is ultimately a product of a particular method of understanding and a specific approach to reasoning. It carries within it both the affirmation of a theological doctrine and the refutation and correction of erroneous views:

"Indeed, these principles have been used as foundations for various forms of theological debate."

4. The Lost Pluralism in Mu'tazilite Thought

These foundational principles managed to encompass what is considered the correct orthodox faith (*al-madūna al-naṣṣiyya al-rasmiyya*), described by Mohammed Arkoun (d. 2010) as a restrictive doctrine. The Mu'tazila strove to justify, propagate, and defend it as a religious duty incumbent upon the adherents of 'Adl (Divine Justice) and *Tawhīd* (Monotheism). Consequently, a large portion of believers who deviated from these principles—or interpreted and derived alternative doctrines from the Qur'an and Sunnah—were excluded. This led to the escalation of a culture of *taḳfīr* (excommunication) and *tafsīq* (declaring others as morally corrupt), even among the Mu'tazila themselves, as such practices became an easily accessible means of religious authority. Every instance of textual manipulation by a Mu'tazilite served to reinforce their principles, monopolize salvation, and affirm the doctrine of the "Saved Sect" (*al-firqa al-nājiya*) within the confines of their school of thought. Meanwhile, the principle of justice, fairness in reasoning, and the impartial examination of opinions was marginalized. The literature of the 'Adliyya (Mu'tazilite adherents of Divine Justice) was not devoid of texts laden with grim severity, retaliating against every dissenter or challenger to established norms and conventions.

One notable example is the introduction of *Al-Intiṣār* (The Triumph) by *Al-Khayyāt* (d. 312 AH), which was written to attack and refute *Ibn al-Rāwandī* (d. 245 AH) for his audacity in challenging the Mu'tazila. He was accused—perhaps even falsely—of various transgressions as a means of defending the Mu'tazilite scholars and leaders. Like all sects, the Mu'tazila weaponized doctrinal obligations (*lāzim al-madhhab*) as a pretext for denouncing opponents, branding them as infidels and heretics, ultimately justifying their persecution:

"I have read—may God grant you success in obeying Him and guide you to His pleasure—the book of that shameless and foolish man, and I understood its contents. I found it to be the work of someone filled with rage against the people of faith, seething with resentment toward Muslims, falsely attributing to them words they never uttered and beliefs they never held. He dares to lie and fabricate slander with reckless disregard for truth and morality."

Since Ibn al-Rāwandī was affiliated with the Rāfiḍa (a pejorative term for Shi'ites), he was subject to the same forms of vilification and denunciation:

"He deceived the ignorant among the Rāfiḍa and the common followers of the Imamate, making them believe that he was equal to the Mu'tazila in knowledge and understanding of their doctrines."

Thus, as Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748 AH) points out, *Al-Intiṣār* was essentially a reactionary work against perceived acts of disobedience and defiance. This reflects the nature of dogmatic thinking, which seeks victory rather than compromise when dealing with those labeled as enemies of the faith, the sect, or the group:

"He refuted Ibn al-Rāwandī's book Faḍā'iḥ al-Mu'tazila (The Disgrace of the Mu'tazila)."

Ibn al-Rāwandī had been a Mu'tazilite for some time before he renounced their doctrines and rebelled against what they called *Ahl al-Ḥaqq* (the People of Truth). Consequently, he was branded as an atheist, leading to his expulsion from the Mu'tazila, as they deemed his path to be one of demonic misguidance:

"He was once a follower among their ranks, attending their gatherings and learning from their elders—until he became an atheist, denied his Creator, and was cast out by the Mu'tazila, who expelled him from their assemblies."

It would not be inaccurate to claim that the primary motivation behind Al-Khayyāṭ's book was not Ibn al-Rāwandī's alleged atheism but rather his challenge to Mu'tazilite scholars. The internal betrayal (*riddah dākhiliyya*) he committed was a far graver offense than apostasy from Islam itself. The space for religious and intellectual freedom—whether internal or external—was extremely narrow.

Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415 AH) classified Ibn al-Rāwandī in the eighth tier of Mu'tazilite scholars:

"Ibn al-Rāwandī, the condemned, was once among this tier, but then he deviated as he did."

Similarly, Ibn al-Murtaḍā (d. 840 AH) described him as having embraced atheism and disbelief. His book *Faḍā'iḥ al-Mu'tazila*, which sought to expose the flaws in Mu'tazilite principles, was seen as an attempt to undermine and discredit them:

"Then he deviated as he did, renounced the faith, displayed atheism and heresy, and was cast out by the Mu'tazila."

5. The Fragmentation and Division Within the Mu'tazila

The Mu'tazila discredited many of their followers the moment they deviated from their leaders, scholars, and foundational principles. These individuals suffered the same fate as Ibn al-Rawandi. A prime example is Abu al-Husayn al-Basri (d. 436 AH), who had extensive knowledge in jurisprudence, theology, and the principles of Islamic thought. However, he ultimately harmed

himself by rejecting the arguments of the early Mu'tazili imams. Al-Hakim al-Jushami (d. 494 AH) describes him as a representative of the twelfth generation of the Mu'tazila:

"Our companions avoided him for two reasons: first, he tainted himself with elements of philosophy and the arguments of the ancients; second, he refuted some of the elders' arguments in his writings, claiming that such reasoning was invalid. Because of these two matters, his knowledge was not blessed."

The gates of independent reasoning (ijtihad) were closed to followers within the supposedly rationalist and free-thinking Mu'tazila. Despite their claims of openness to philosophy and unconventional methodologies, they held their scholars and imams in near-sacred regard. Allegiance to the elders persisted even among those advocating free will and rationality. Loyalty was to individuals and chains of transmission, which the Mu'tazila extended even to the Ahl al-Bayt (the Prophet's family):

"Their chain of transmission extends visibly and explicitly to Wasil and 'Amr, who both took from Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and his son Abu Hashim 'Abdullah ibn Muhammad. Muhammad raised and educated Wasil until he became proficient. Muhammad, in turn, took from his father 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, who received directly from the Messenger of God (peace be upon him)."

This lineage strengthened their claim as authorities in theology. However, deviation from communal traditions led to exclusion, marginalization, and severe criticism. They branded one another as innovators and sinners despite sharing the same five foundational principles, as attested by their fierce opponent Abu al-Husayn al-Malati (d. 377 AH):

"Between the Mu'tazila of Baghdad and those of Basra, there exist numerous severe disagreements. Some among them even declare others to be disbelievers over more than a thousand issues."

Even Ibrahim ibn Sayyar al-Nazzam (d. 231 AH), one of the most brilliant minds of the Mu'tazili school, was not spared accusations of heresy:

"Most Mu'tazilites agree on declaring al-Nazzam a disbeliever."

As for Abu 'Ali al-Jubba'i (d. 303 AH), opinions on him varied among Mu'tazili scholars. Some followed him, others rejected him as an innovator, while some remained silent:

"Among Abu 'Ali's followers, some agreed with him on certain points, others hesitated, while others strongly opposed him to the extent of declaring him a disbeliever."

Even his own son, Abu Hashim (d. 321 AH), accused him of disbelief for opposing some of his views:

"Despite his own heresies, he accused other Mu'tazilites of disbelief and renounced them. He even went so far as to excommunicate his own father, refused to inherit from him after his death,

and publicly distanced himself from him. The rest of the Mu'tazilites also declared him a disbeliever."

These internal accusations and excommunications illustrate the intense sectarianism within the Mu'tazila. Both internal sources and external critics confirm that the movement experienced significant fragmentation despite its intellectual foundations. Dissenters were expelled and excommunicated, even though they were raised within a tradition that championed free thought and rationalism:

"The Mu'tazila split into twenty sects, each accusing the others of disbelief."

Some even applied absolute excommunication without distinction, as seen in the case of Abu 'Abdullah al-Sumayri (d. 315 AH), who promoted the concept of "Takfir Ahl al-Dar" (declaring an entire society disbelievers). He judged entire communities as disbelievers if they adopted doctrines like predestination (al-jabr), anthropomorphism (al-tashbih), or the createdness of the Qur'an. Judge 'Abd al-Jabbar reports:

"His view on society was like that of the Hudhaydiyya sect: if a community is dominated by belief in predestination and anthropomorphism, it is a land of disbelief."

Predestination and anthropomorphism directly opposed Mu'tazili principles and their theological branches. The Mu'tazila emphasized divine transcendence and denied divine attributes to avoid implying multiple eternal beings alongside God. Anyone who deviated from the movement's theological formula faced expulsion and excommunication. For instance, Dhirar ibn 'Amr (d. 230 AH) was ousted for advocating predestination, which, according to Mu'tazili doctrine, undermined divine justice and human free will. His rejection was absolute:

"The lesser figures of the Mu'tazila and leaders of various factions, such as Dhirar ibn 'Amr, studied under them but later deviated. They declared him a disbeliever and expelled him. Anyone who still considers him a Mu'tazili is mistaken because we renounce him; he belongs to the fatalists (al-mujbira)."

Challenging Mu'tazili elders led to immediate disqualification, even for those who identified with Mu'tazili thought. The movement's supposed reliance on rational inquiry and independent reasoning was overshadowed by internal dogmatism:

"They adopted pure reason as the sole and absolute source of knowledge, rejecting any rival methodology for reasoning and interpretation. Since minds differ in their conclusions, this led to wide-ranging contradictions, reflected in the endless debates and refutations among them."

The Mu'tazila did not tolerate doctrinal pluralism in theology, which is why they established their five core principles as the ultimate measure of faith and disbelief. Allegiance and disavowal were determined by adherence to these principles:

"We have previously explained that when doctrines involve matters of belief—such as divine unity and justice—only one position can be true. We have also demonstrated the reasoning for this in the section on moral obligations."

This rigid stance eliminated any room for theological diversity. Religious truth was perceived as singular and absolute, acknowledged by all sects of theological discourse. Matters of doctrine were considered definitive, based on authenticated sources, and not subject to doubt or interpretation. Accepting alternative views was seen as opening the door to heresy and contradiction, which was deemed intellectually and scripturally impermissible:

"It has been established that the truth in religious doctrine must be singular. Contradictory theological schools cannot all be correct."

Abu al-Husayn al-Basri even equated doctrinal pluralism within Islam to accepting multiple religious paths, a notion he refuted by affirming the exclusive truth of Islam and the salvation of its adherents. He viewed theological pluralism within Islam as no different from tolerating polytheistic and heretical sects:

"If differing interpretations in core religious matters were acceptable, then external religions—such as those of the atheists, Brahmins, Jews, and Christians—could also be valid, as long as a sincere effort led to them. Since these religions cannot all be correct, the same applies to theological divisions within Islam."

The Mu'tazila, therefore, regarded their own doctrine as the sole path to salvation within Islam. The corruption of other religions was not far removed from the corruption of rival theological schools. Just as divine unity necessitated a singular religion, it also necessitated a singular theological doctrine:

"Since rational evidence confirms the validity of one doctrine over others, we must be certain of its truth. We then interpret the Qur'an and Sunnah in accordance with it."

These texts reveal that the Mu'tazila utterly rejected theological diversity. Even a sincere theologian who erred in doctrine was not excused but instead subjected to condemnation—whether innovation, heresy, or outright disbelief:

"This indicates that the Mu'tazila did not accept doctrinal differences, even if the opposing view was based on interpretation and rational inquiry."

Once someone was declared a disbeliever, legal and social consequences followed. Many Mu'tazilites concealed their beliefs under the guise of taqiyya (religious dissimulation), fearing persecution and seeking to protect their lives, families, and faith. This led to a culture of secrecy:

"Later generations of our companions became withdrawn—whether out of fear of persecution like what happened to Ghaylan, al-Hasan, Wasil, and 'Amr, or to safeguard their faith from unjust rulers. As a result, our numbers diminished among the common people."

The Mu'tazila established a set of principles upon which their concept of takfir (excommunication) was based, inseparable from the five foundational doctrines that constituted their school of thought. Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar emphasized this correlation, whether in acceptance or rejection, and defined the boundaries of faith and disbelief, stating:

"One who opposes these fundamental principles may be deemed a disbeliever, a sinner, or simply mistaken."

Any deviation from these rules inevitably led to disbelief, as they were considered the very foundation of religion. There was no room for independent reasoning (ijtihad) in these core beliefs. Consequently, the Mu'tazila applied takfir in strict and consistent alignment with their theological tenets, viewing any divergence from their principles—or the concepts and doctrines derived from them—as grounds for excommunication. Abu al-Qasim al-Busti (d. 420 AH) elaborates:

"Know that our elders—may God have mercy on them—have stated that all forms of disbelief stem from one of five sources: ignorance of God, anthropomorphism (tashbih), denial of divine unity (tawhid), permissiveness in doctrine (tajwiz), or outright denial (takdhib). Any form of disbelief, whether expressed through speech or reasoning, falls within these five categories... No disbelief exists in religions, sects, or schools of thought except through these traits."

Like other sects, the Mu'tazila claimed they adhered strictly to the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the guidance of the early generations of Islam (salaf). Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar reinforced this view, upholding the Mu'tazili claim to theological justice (al-'Adliyya) and rejecting accusations of innovation (bid'a) leveled against them by their opponents. In his letter to the ruler of Khwarazm Shah (d. 628 AH), the last monarch of the Mu'tazili-affiliated Mamunid dynasty, he wrote:

"May God preserve His Majesty—I must write a book demonstrating that the Mu'tazili doctrine is the one dictated by reason, the Qur'an, and the Sunnah. It is the path followed by both the early and later generations. Anthropomorphism (tashbih), predestinarianism (jabr), and all other false sects arose later, invented over time by ignorant people, then spread through blind imitation and popular following."

Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar went even further, asserting that these theological principles were divinely ordained and could not be doubted or altered. He viewed them as immutable religious laws that neither permitted criticism nor skepticism, for they were established by the Prophet (peace be upon him), confirmed by Qur'anic revelation, upheld by the Companions, and followed by the early generations of Muslims. He states:

"This comprehensive doctrine includes what our scholars—may God have mercy on them—call the five principles, which are universally agreed upon. These are the principles upon which the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his Companions stood firm until disagreements arose. They are explicitly affirmed in the Qur'an and Sunnah, and they were upheld by the early generations."

Sectarian Exclusion and the Absence of Coexistence with Opposing Groups

Now, we turn to the Mu'tazili stance towards other sects, which diverged from them in foundational beliefs and doctrines. Their principle of *commanding good and forbidding evil*—the fifth of their five doctrines—was regarded as a communal obligation (*fard kifaya*) and often used as a justification for both theological and political opposition to their adversaries. They maintained:

"There is no disagreement regarding the obligation of commanding good and forbidding evil... The Qur'an, Sunnah, and scholarly consensus all affirm this duty."

Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi (d. 414 AH) provides an important insight into the Mu'tazili fervor for anathematizing their opponents, illustrating their absolute intolerance toward dissenters. Even those within their own ranks were not spared from accusations of heresy:

"I see the Mu'tazila in our time rushing to declare others as disbelievers as swiftly as a thirsty man rushes to a water source. I do not know what drives them to this except a lack of piety and self-restraint."

Despite their advocacy for free will—"They unanimously agreed that human actions are not created by God within them"—their most intense hostility was directed at those who denied free choice, such as the Jabriyya (fatalists) and the Qadariyya (predestinarians). They also fiercely opposed those who failed to uphold strict divine transcendence, accusing them of anthropomorphism (*tashbih*) and corporealism (*tajsim*). For the Mu'tazila, such doctrines were an affront to divine unity (*tawhid*) and merited severe censure and retribution.

Abu al-Qasim al-Busti notes:

"Know that our elders—may God have mercy on them—relied upon the principle that ignorance of God, anthropomorphism, and fatalism are all forms of disbelief."

The Jabriyya, in particular, were condemned for attributing evil to God by denying human free will and depicting mankind as passive objects of divine will, like leaves blown by the wind. This belief, according to Mu'tazili reasoning, necessitated disbelief:

"On this basis, it is impossible to describe God as evil... Whoever attributes evil to Him or calls Him an evildoer is a disbeliever."

The Mu'tazila viewed this theological position as a grave error with dire consequences for those who upheld it. They considered the claim that human actions are created by God to be a fundamental mistake, leading to theological contradictions:

"Whoever claims that God, exalted be He, creates and originates human actions has made a serious error. They have falsely assigned two creators to a single action."

According to Mu'tazili logic, it was inconceivable for the same act—such as murder—to be simultaneously the deed of both God and the human perpetrator. Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar devoted

significant portions of his works to refuting this notion, arguing that fatalism leads its adherents away from Islam:

"Once this is understood, it becomes clear that their doctrine regarding creation is false. Their belief is invalidated through numerous rational arguments, exposing its corrupt consequences and its role in undermining religion and leading its followers out of Islam."

He further asserted that disbelief carried inevitable consequences, and that the accusation of injustice against God—stemming from the Jabriyya's doctrine—was a theological transgression beyond tolerance:

"Their error has become so grave that it amounts to disbelief. There is no doubt that one who knowingly describes God as unjust is a disbeliever, as they believe He commits acts of injustice. Without this belief, they would not be considered disbelievers."

Moreover, Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar linked the doctrine of fatalism to pre-Islamic polytheistic traditions, portraying it as a foreign intrusion into Islamic theology:

"We know that no group is closer to the Magians than the Jabriyya."

He even argued that the Jabriyya were in a worse state than all other misguided sects, including those who had completely abandoned Islam. Their claim to monotheism, he contended, did not spare them from the Mu'tazili verdict of excommunication, as they denied human free will—a principle inextricably linked to divine justice (al-'Adl). Consequently, they were deemed unworthy of divine mercy or salvation:

"The Jabriyya, despite knowing the ugliness of their beliefs, attributed them to God without any sense of shame or piety. This makes their situation worse than that of all other disbelievers, including atheists and corporealists... Their condition is even worse than that of other misguided sects outside of Islam."

The Mu'tazili hostility also extended to the anthropomorphists (mushabbiha), as their doctrine contradicted the Mu'tazili commitment to absolute divine transcendence. In their pursuit of theological purity, the Mu'tazila went so far as to deny divine attributes altogether, fearing that affirming them would compromise God's oneness and introduce plurality into His essence.

As the judge asked, "Why did you label them as such, accuse them, and exclude them from being monotheists?" The excommunication (takfir) of the anthropomorphists (mushabbihah) was a point of agreement and consensus among the Mu'tazilites, as Abu al-Qasim al-Busti states: "Know that our elders, may Allah have mercy on them, excommunicated the anthropomorphists, and the basis for this is consensus. This is because no one in the community, when asked about those who liken Allah to His creation, fails to say that they are disbelievers. The stance of excommunicating the anthropomorphists emerged in the community without any known dispute... Consensus is established on this matter."

The texts of excommunication did not stop at the determinists (mujbirah) and anthropomorphists but extended to include the Kullabiyyah regarding the issue of divine attributes. This conflicted with the views of the scholars of transcendence (tanzih), who saw the doctrine of the Kullabiyyah as corrupt, leading to their excommunication as part of the ongoing theological and sectarian struggle. Their situation became worse and more reprehensible than that of the Christians: "This necessitates affirming an infinite number of deities, as we have refuted the Kullabiyyah on this issue. Every argument we have used to invalidate their doctrines also invalidates the doctrine of the Christians... In fact, the doctrine of the Kullabiyyah is even more corrupt."

These texts have been considered evidence of the Mu'tazilites' involvement in sectarian oppression and theological racism against their opponents, seeing themselves as the guardians of the faith and its defenders: "They considered themselves entitled to defend the Islamic creed." Like all sects, they worked to fuel conflict and division rather than dialogue and rapprochement. The Mu'tazilites, like other groups, used politics to support their doctrine, spread their beliefs, attack their opponents, strip them of their freedoms, and force them to choose between loyalty and subordination to the religious group or being expelled from the religious community as outcasts and cursed. This was realized during the Abbasid era when they gained the favor of the caliphs and brought them to adopt Mu'tazilite beliefs, particularly during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun (d. 218 AH): "The doctrine of the Mu'tazilah became the official creed of the state after al-Ma'mun assumed the caliphate, having been raised with Mu'tazilite influences. As a result, the persecution of jurists, hadith scholars, and all opponents of the Mu'tazilites intensified. This violent conflict became apparent in the ordeal (mihna) of the createdness of the Qur'an."

When the opponents of the Mu'tazilites refused to submit through debate, they sought to subdue them through politics and state power, transitioning from a war of words and writing to persecution and suppression in reality: "This was a strong reason for the Mu'tazilites to move from the realm of debate, argumentation, and persuasion to direct confrontation with opposing sects. This shift was a dire warning for the entire Mu'tazilite community. This difficult choice cost them their rational theological positions when they resorted to the ordeal after failing to convince their opponents through argumentation and discussion."

The doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'an became the standard for judging the sincerity of people's faith, and all individuals, whether commoners or elites, were tested on it. This religious and political ambition materialized under the Abbasids, who aimed to crush political and religious opposition. The Mu'tazilites excommunicated anyone who refused to openly declare the createdness of the Qur'an, stripping them of their monotheism and denying them a place in the faith. This position was reinforced when al-Ma'mun officially declared it, beginning to correspond

with jurists to examine scholars on the matter, particularly the hadith scholars who rejected the narrative of the Qur'an's createdness. Historians record that this took place in 218 AH: "In this year, al-Ma'mun wrote to Ishaq ibn Ibrahim to examine the judges and hadith scholars."

The letter contained the final formulation of the creed in Mu'tazilite-Baghdadi terms, with a compulsory, determinist tone, warning those who refused or deviated from it. The letter included severe criticism and condemnation of those who opposed this theological doctrine: "They are the ones who argued falsely, invited people to their view, and attributed themselves to the Sunnah. Yet, in every chapter of the Qur'an, there are verses whose mere recitation refutes their claim and invalidates their argument. Nonetheless, they presented themselves as the people of truth, religion, and unity, while portraying everyone else as followers of falsehood, disbelief, and division."

Even their opponents monopolized titles such as "the victorious group" and "the saved sect," illustrating how each faction took pride in its doctrines, constructing fortified barriers around them that could not be penetrated or shaken, defending and preserving them to ensure their survival and continuity. Al-Ma'mun went further by describing his opponents in the most disgraceful and repugnant terms, branding them with degrading labels due to their theological deviation: "The Commander of the Faithful saw that those people were the worst of the nation, the heads of misguidance, the most deprived of monotheism, and the most deficient in faith. They were vessels of ignorance, beacons of falsehood, and the speaking tongue of Satan among his allies, striking terror into his enemies from among the people of God's religion. They were the most deserving of being deemed untrustworthy, their testimonies to be rejected, and their words and deeds to be distrusted, for there is no valid action except after certainty."

In a second letter, he sent a text filled with blood and severe persecution, mandating execution for those who disobeyed and rebelled against Orthodox faith:

"The Commander of the Faithful sees it necessary to summon those who adopt this belief, as this belief constitutes explicit disbelief and pure polytheism in his view. If they repent, publicize their repentance and release them. But if they persist in their polytheism and deny that the Quran is created—thus confirming their disbelief and atheism—then strike off their heads and send their heads to the Commander of the Faithful."

Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241 AH) was one of the victims of this ordeal. He became a symbol of patience and a hero of the ordeal against the tyranny of the ruler and the religious authorities after refusing to comply with this doctrine. He remained steadfast in the face of this trial, refusing to accept the idea that the Quran was created. He subjected his body to torture in his struggle against the doctrine of the Mu'tazilites, in one of the harshest forms of religious persecution observed by the Mu'tazilite Inquisition.

"The hadith scholar Ahmad ibn Hanbal became famous in the issue of the Quran's creation when the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun ordered scholars to declare that the Quran was created... When the governor of Baghdad gathered the hadith scholars and informed them of al-Ma'mun's wish, they all complied except for Ahmad ibn Hanbal, who was then arrested and flogged during the reign of al-Mu'tasim before being released."

Al-Ma'mun ordered the princes and governors of all provinces to force the people, using whips and coercion, to affirm and believe in the doctrine of the Quran's creation:

"People wavered between acceptance and rejection until the time of al-Ma'mun, who forced them to declare that the Quran was created. Anyone who refused was subjected to the severest punishment."

This was the politicization of theology, making it serve the caliph or ruler. Here was al-Ma'mun wielding the sword of law and the whip of punishment against rebels who posed a political threat before a religious one, in line with his doctrinal commitment and allegiance to the Mu'tazilite creed, which in reality expressed a deeply political decision.

Al-Ma'mun believed that the majority of the common people had corrupt beliefs, a confused understanding, and had deviated from true monotheism, which, according to him, was exclusively contained within the Mu'tazilite doctrine. In popular culture, the belief in the eternity of the Quran had taken root—an idea he considered outright disbelief, as it implied the existence of two eternal beings, thus undermining monotheism, which affirms the eternity of only one.

"The Commander of the Faithful realized that the majority of the people—the ignorant masses and the lowly commoners who lack insight, contemplation, and the light of knowledge—are ignorant of God, blind to Him, and misguided from the truth of His religion and oneness. They fail to estimate God properly, to know Him as He truly is, or to distinguish between Him and His creation due to their weak reasoning, deficient intellects, and lack of contemplation. They equated God Almighty with the Quran, agreeing unanimously and without hesitation that it is eternal and uncreated."

Even appointments to state positions such as judgeships and governorships were influenced by this doctrine. Competence in knowledge, piety, and religion was not the criterion for selection; rather, it was one's acceptance of the doctrine dictated by the caliphate, publicly affirmed under coercion:

"In the year 833 CE, a law was enacted requiring high-ranking officials in the capital and provinces to publicly declare their acceptance of the Mu'tazilite doctrine of the Quran's creation. Although many did not genuinely believe in this doctrine, the vast majority publicly professed it, for their belief was not strong enough to withstand the loss of position and the material hardships that would follow rejection."

Thus, adhering to Mu'tazilite theological principles became a sacred religious capital with political and social backing. It was a prerequisite for holding political office and securing government positions, such as the judiciary, which was headed by Ahmad ibn Abi Du'ad (d. 240 AH), a leading advocate of the Quran's creation and a persecutor of its opponents. Those who doubted or opposed this doctrine were stoned, burned, and killed.

"The enemy of Ahmad ibn Hanbal was an advocate of the Quran's creation. He was generous, eloquent, and noble."

All of this took place within the context of the Mu'tazilite principle of *"commanding good and forbidding evil,"* wherein the belief in the eternity of divine speech was considered an abhorrent deviation, and fighting against it with both speech and force was deemed a religious duty.

The opposition was thus portrayed in two ways: as a threat to the officially sanctioned doctrine and as a challenge to political authority. Recognition by the opposition and submission by adversaries signified a victory for the ruler and his faction, while it meant defeat and subjugation for the dissidents. It was a means of shaping and controlling the masses, who needed to be won over and directed.

Sectarianism thrives and spreads within the popular base—in markets, palaces, mosques, shops, gatherings, and even cemeteries. The common people, the vast majority of society, were well understood by the Mu'tazilites, who recognized the danger and power of the public. The Ahl al-Hadith and traditional jurists managed to rally this public sentiment by promoting spiritual figures who embodied religious authority and authenticity, modeling themselves after the earthly capital of Islam: the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

These figures commanded immense reverence, admiration, and respect among the common people, who were known for their enthusiasm, impulsiveness, and volatility. They awaited history to record their victory as steadfast heroes or, if they failed, to consign them to oblivion, buried in the margins of history, forgotten in the annals of defeat.

Religious and political opposition were two sides of the same coin. The *mihna* (ordeal) had an explicit surface and a hidden depth—spoken elements and silent ones, felt realities and unperceived strategies. It was a calculated policy of concealment and implication by which the caliph managed his subjects. Any movement within the religious structure, any change in religious symbols or fatwas, was intimately tied to the palace of power—its stability or transformation, its continuity or demise. There was a direct correlation between religion and politics:

"The apparent and spoken issue was the debate over the Quran's creation. The hidden and unspoken reality was the political unrest against the caliph, the attempt to revolt against him, to seize power from him... These were the true underlying motives behind what al-Ma'mun, al-Mu'tasim, and al-Wathiq did in testing the people, especially the state officials, jurists, and judges."

A self-reproaching narrative was established on two levels—political and social—within the Abbasid environment, oppressive in nature, striking down those who deviated from the theological framework in its Mu'tazilite form, just as those who opposed the party of Ali ibn Abi Talib at the Battle of Siffin were met with nothing but takfir (excommunication) and expulsion. The Mu'tazila laid the foundation for inquisitions akin to what the Church enacted in the Middle Ages, pursuing any religious or intellectual deviation that undermined Catholic belief. Their role was to suppress freedoms and hunt down those who strayed from the doctrine, acting as the enforcers of "commanding the good and forbidding the evil"—where the "good" was defined by the theological sect and the "evil" was likewise determined by them. The "good" upheld by the religious (Mu'tazilite) and political (Abbasid) institutions was that "the Qur'an is a created, originated entity," while the "evil" that they denounced, defiled, and desecrated was the belief that "the Qur'an is eternal and preexistent."

"In the year 827 specifically, al-Ma'mun, incited by Ibn Abi Du'ad, proclaimed the doctrine of the creation of the Qur'an and established a form of inquisition." The Mu'tazila paid no heed to any sheikh, follower, or independent jurist, for the courts of faith concerned themselves only with violations and transgressions that exceeded the limits of the Mu'tazilite doctrine. "At that time, the Abbasid state had adopted the Mu'tazilite stance on this matter, subjecting judges, jurists, leaders of Islamic schools of thought, and governors to examinations regarding their positions on it."

The Mu'tazilite doctrine gained prestige and flourished under the Abbasid political trinity of "al-Ma'mun, al-Mu'tasim, and al-Wathiq." This period marked the golden age of Mu'tazilism, an era of strength and dominance for the champions of rationalism. The caliphate of al-Wathiq Billah (227–232 AH) was particularly severe in compelling both the elite and the common people to profess the doctrine of the Qur'an's creation and to subject religious figures to examination. "Harun al-Wathiq was among the most ardent proponents of the doctrine of the Qur'an's creation, advocating it night and day, in secret and in public."

Like wildfire, this doctrine consumed all opposition, crushing contrary beliefs and scrutinizing them in the hearts and tongues of the people. This is evident in the decree from al-Wathiq to the jurist and judge of Egypt, Muhammad ibn Abi Layth al-Khwarizmi (d. 250 AH): "He was ordered to examine all people, leaving no jurist, hadith scholar, muezzin, or teacher exempt from the ordeal. Many fled, and the prisons were filled with those who rejected the inquisition. Ibn Abi Layth was further commanded to inscribe on the mosques: 'There is no god but Allah, the Lord of the [created] Qur'an.' This inscription was placed on the mosques of Fustat, Egypt, and the jurists of the Maliki and Shafi'i schools were banned from sitting in the mosque and were ordered not to approach it."

The caliph himself was the sword and executioner, offering human sacrifices overflowing with blood in triumph for sacred letters and voices eternally proclaiming: "The Qur'an is created." The hadith scholar and imam Ahmad ibn Nasr al-Khuza'i was subjected to the inquisition regarding the doctrine of the Qur'an's creation, but he refused to comply or acknowledge it. As a result, he was beheaded, his head was paraded, and his body was crucified in Baghdad. Ibn Kathir al-Dimashqi recounts: "A note was attached to his ear, reading: 'This is the head of the infidel, polytheist, and misguided Ahmad ibn Nasr, who was killed at the hands of Abdullah Harun, the Imam al-Wathiq Billah, Commander of the Faithful, after the argument had been established against him concerning the creation of the Qur'an and the negation of anthropomorphism. He was given the opportunity to repent and return to the truth, but he stubbornly persisted and openly defied it. Praise be to Allah, who hastened him to His Fire and painful punishment for his disbelief, whereby the Commander of the Faithful deemed his blood lawful and cursed him.'"

The theological sects considered combating heresies a great jihad, as it upheld religion, safeguarded the saved sect, and defended the correct creed. It necessitated exposing and shaming every apostate who opposed the doctrine of the community, intensifying hostility toward them, debating them, exacting retribution against them, and warning others about their corruption. They were to be treated as enemies of God in heaven and adversaries of the community and the caliph on earth, as articulated by Thumama al-Ashras: "The best speech is that which combines argumentation and vengeance."

The historical and even theological literature has been conflicted in describing and depicting the ordeal of the creation of the Qur'an. Some viewed it as a fair and just trial that defended the truth and expelled falsehood, while others accused it of injustice, tyranny, suppression of freedoms, and the establishment of a totalitarian doctrine at the level of thought and belief.

The figure of Ahmad ibn Hanbal and what he endured throughout the ordeal held a dual imagery in the minds of historians and sects. Some portray him as a symbol of patience and steadfastness in upholding the truth, while others depict his end as one of acknowledgment and admission of the doctrine of the created Qur'an. It is sufficient to examine two conflicting narratives to reveal the influence of ideology and sectarianism in presenting facts and recounting events.

One can refer to the account of Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 597 AH), the historian and Hanbali jurist of Baghdad, as he paints the historical picture of the inquisition and persecution of Ibn Hanbal under Al-Mu'tasim, depicting him as the oppressed hero who ultimately triumphed after being taken to Baghdad. The account of Salih ibn Ahmad ibn Hanbal states:

"My father said: When the whip was brought in, Al-Mu'tasim looked at it and said, 'Bring me another one,' so they brought another. Then he said to the executioners, 'Proceed!' Each one of them would come forward, strike me twice, and then Al-Mu'tasim would say, 'Strike harder! May God cut off

your hands!' Then another would step forward and do the same. My father said: My mind left me... The time for the noon prayer came, and Ibn Sam'ah led the prayer. When he finished, he said to me, 'Did you pray while blood was flowing on your clothes?!'"

Similarly, the hadith scholar Ahmad ibn Nasr al-Khuza'i was executed for refusing to acknowledge the created nature of the Qur'an after being subjected to the ordeal. The Abbasid caliph Al-Wathiq beheaded him and desecrated his body, as numerous accounts in historical books narrate. The accusation inevitably led to punishment, which always took a dramatic form—pleasing the caliph, delighting the audience, bringing victory to the religious party, and satisfying God in the heavens.

The inquisition of jurists regarding the creation of the Qur'an and the elimination of dissenters was regarded as a sacred offering to the heavens, an act of worship and devotion to the law that deserved praise and commendation, as reflected in the words of the Mu'tazilite judge Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad ibn Sama'ah (d. 233 AH):

"He said to Al-Mu'tasim after he had done what he did to Ibn Hanbal: 'O Commander of the Faithful, this is a stance in which you have fulfilled God's right and pleased Him, so may God reward you for it.'"

This is an example of the lamenting and elegiac narratives that portray Ibn Hanbal as a victim of the brutality and persecution of the Abbasid inquisition and its religious figures. In contrast, there exists another narrative of defeat and confession regarding the examined figure of Ibn Hanbal, portraying his failure to follow the path of truth and his lack of integration into the belief system affirming the created nature of divine speech.

This is illustrated in the historical representation of the ordeal by Al-Jahiz, with his eloquent and masterful prose, depicting the inquisition as the epitome of fairness, impartiality, and objectivity, grounded in argumentation and evidence from the Qur'an, hadith, and rational reasoning:

"After all, we did not declare anyone a disbeliever except those to whom we provided extensive proof, nor did we test anyone except those suspected. Your man (Ibn Hanbal) used to say: 'There is no dissimulation except in the land of disbelief.' If his admission of the created nature of the Qur'an was merely out of dissimulation, then he employed dissimulation in the land of Islam and contradicted himself. But if he truly believed in what he admitted, then he is neither from you nor are you from him. Moreover, he did not see an unsheathed sword, was not severely beaten, nor was he struck more than thirty lashes with frayed and tattered ends, until he confessed repeatedly. He was not confined in a narrow space, nor was his condition one of despair. He was neither burdened with iron chains nor was his heart shattered by severe threats. Instead, he was gently debated, but he responded harshly; they remained patient, but he was reckless; they acted wisely, but he was rash."

He was not an honest or fair-minded individual who would yield to evidence and argument, as it was narrated:

"The caliph recognized his falsehood when questioned, just as he recognized his obstinacy when presented with proof."

Given that public sentiment and the popular wave leaned towards the jurists and hadith scholars, the Mu'tazilites justified seeking the support of political power to institutionalize politics and utilize it to advance sectarian doctrine, impose theological dominance over society, and shape public belief. Al-Jahiz himself acknowledges the role of the ruler in exerting control and directing the faith and imagination of the masses toward the sanctuary of Mu'tazilite belief as a means of legislation and moral discipline, as he states:

"Now you have two things: the ruler and their inclination towards him, as well as their fear of him. And the final victory belongs to the righteous."

Caution and vigilance are necessary for any theological sect or school that assumes religious or even political prominence, as trust is lacking, and deceit, intrigue, and conspiracies are prevalent among the populace, as well as among the leaders of sects and schools. Their resentment and animosity toward the Mu'tazilites were intense, and they wished for their downfall, whether through divine intervention or the work of Satan:

"They are constantly in anguish over the Mu'tazilites. Their treachery is abundant, their hostility is severe, and the common people support them, and the ignorant masses obey them."

The history of doctrines among theologians and jurists can be portrayed as a history of extermination and doctrinal cleansing of dissenters and opponents. The religious community at that time was intolerant of the different "other" who sought to coexist and share political and social belonging. However, this presence existed only in potentiality and did not materialize in actuality, as philosophers would put it. The elimination of dissenters was not only physical or social but extended even to the literary heritage that once enriched the Islamic library. This heritage was classified into two categories: one that was loyal and worthy of preservation, and another that was hostile and had to be obliterated. The works of sects that opposed the ruling authority's doctrine, those that did not align with the state's official ideology or policies, and those that defended groups undesirable to rulers and their influential circles were all lost. These books were treated as prohibited materials and were destroyed—especially intellectual works.

Anyone who delves into the history of Islamic sects will not be pleased, for they will be shocked by the extent of conflict, marginalization, and the vengeful spirit that governed the movements of dialectical theology. This theological intellect was consumed by a tendency for exclusion and intolerance, obsessed with demeaning and humiliating opponents, forcing them to accept its doctrine, and establishing proof against them using all means of argumentation and

debate. No innovator, follower, ascetic, or mystic was spared, as the philosophy of criticism and intellectual humility was absent. Consequently, independent reasoning (ijtihad) and renewal in religion were obstructed, leading to a flood of accusations of heresy and atheism.

The list of those who were executed, tortured, or imprisoned—both underground and above ground—included philosophers, theologians, logicians, poets, jurists, judges, Sufi figures, Mu'tazilite leaders, Shiite imams, Kharijite leaders, and even materialists and atheists. Among them were also Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Abu Hanifa, and many others. The margin of freedom diminished and withered even during the so-called "Golden Age" of the Mu'tazila, who fascinated generations throughout history by convincing most minds that humans are free to the extent that they create their own actions. They agreed that "man is capable of creating his actions, whether good or evil, and is therefore deserving of reward or punishment in the hereafter." They did not hesitate to use such terminology in service of the human pursuit of freedom.

The Mu'tazila were also the ones who opposed the Umayyad state and resisted it, as it had suppressed freedom and adopted fatalism as its doctrine of power. However, people were later surprised to find that the Mu'tazilite doctrine regarding the Qur'an had become the official religious stance, just as the Abbasid state itself had become official. Muslims were required to accept it, and those who dissented were tested on their adherence—first through debate, and if they did not comply, through the whip and the sword.

From this, we conclude that sectarian superiority, the desire to champion one's sect, and the urge to take revenge on opponents were deeply embedded in the subconscious of the religious community. These urges were acted upon when the sect gained strength, aligning itself with politics while keeping religion at its side. Thus, exclusivist thinking prevailed, exemplified by the Mu'tazila, who produced a fanatical theologian—those who monopolized both the textual authority and the intellectual domain under the pretext of unifying the nation and protecting the faith from turmoil. The concept of "the unity of the nation" was frequently used as a pretext to suppress any independent reasoning, new opinion, or interpretation that deviated from the official doctrine imposed by political and spiritual authorities.

Like other sects, the Mu'tazila treated the text as a closed domain, reserving for themselves the exclusive right to interpret and understand it. This approach fostered a fundamentalist mindset, even among those who prioritized reason over tradition. They believed in the totalizing nature of religious thought and fled from plurality and diversity, instead declaring war on the different and the multiple. They rejected any diversity in textual interpretation that could enrich understanding and expand its semantic horizons. For them, independent reasoning in theology signified deviation from the faith. This fundamentalist mindset pervaded all theological camps without exception, treating the interpretations of early scholars as eternal doctrines valid for all times and places.

This ultimately led to intellectual violence and extremism. A rigid, monolithic reading of texts—one that seeks a single, original meaning to be found, conformed to, and enacted—translated into religious wars, sectarian strife, and doctrinal purges. Each sect believed itself to be the most faithful to the literal text and the closest to its true spirit and meaning. Consequently, it viewed difference as either an innovation and misguidance or a heresy and distortion.

The Mu'tazilites, with their religious and political enthusiasm, stripped divine mercy from all their opponents, accusing them of apostasy, disbelief, and innovation, even though each of them sought to reach that light, whose paths are multiple, and they were all seekers of truth. However, they could only attain it through a human and relative approach. Thus, they all fell short and were deficient in their endeavors, striving after the source of revelation had dried up and the heavens had withheld their abundance. Yet, every theologian among them claimed to possess absolute truth, though they and others were more in need of it. This is because interpretations are multiple, and their multiplicity is a form of completeness rather than contradiction.

Of course, the "one truth" is merely a hypothesis we impose here. Otherwise, what we call the one truth merely represents the highest limit of our own understanding, which is specific to us and may not even be correct. If such a single truth exists, it is beyond our reach. What is within our grasp is the diversity of understandings, none of which is superior to the other. The same applies within the boundaries of a single religion—no sect has priority over another, nor is there any proof that one conclusion should be preferred over another or one approach over another.

The Mu'tazilites could not rid themselves of extremism and the spirit of imitation that had plagued their predecessors, so they resorted to excommunication in defense of their beliefs and the principles they considered eternally fixed. Consequently, they became entangled in suppressing religious freedoms and reinforcing exclusive fundamentalism.

"The theologians of Islamic sects excessively engaged in declaring as infidels those who did not share their beliefs. No sect was free from the involvement of some of its theologians in excommunicating dissenters, even if they belonged to the same sect but exercised independent judgment beyond the established doctrinal limits. Even the Mu'tazilites, who were renowned as the representatives of rationalism in Islam, had some theologians who fell into the trap of excommunication."

The theological intellect was satisfied only with a singular image it formed of God—one that allowed for no diversity or difference. This was because the notion of the "saved sect" still resonated in its ears, influencing all its interactions with others from different sects and creeds. It found no recourse but violence, permissiveness, and retaliation as means of triumph, shunning any critical and objective dialogue that might lower the stature of its sect, thereby making divine mercy a cloud that would cover all.

The hadith of the "saved sect" was employed as textual justification, ensuring religious and political power in violating human dignity and stripping away the freedom of belief and interpretation of sacred texts. Thus, the divine discourse—"There is no compulsion in religion" (Surah Al-Baqarah, 256)—was suspended, and in its place emerged an earthly, human discourse: "No freedom in belief." Consequently, thought, expression, and faith were restricted.

"One of the gravest forms of intellectual tyranny is violating another's belief and forcibly subjecting it to an ideological doctrine they do not accept. This falls under the persecution of reason by tradition and the persecution of tradition by reason."

This was the glory written for the Mu'tazilite movement in the Abbasid state. Yet, the fortress they had built would soon crumble before the power of jurists, the populism of the hadith scholars, and the heroism of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, whose steadfastness and struggle against the tyranny of rulers and clerics became a symbol of patience and resistance. Thus, the Mu'tazilites and their figures were overthrown, persecuted, and banished, chased by the very inquisitions they had once overseen, subjected to the trials they had previously imposed on others.

Thus, beliefs were rotated within the political sphere between a victorious, accepted faith that gained proximity to power and a broken, humiliated faith that was alienated. It was sufficient to gain the ruler's favor and mobilize popular support for a doctrine to be officially endorsed, proclaimed in streets, mosques, and markets, elevating its word while exposing and defaming its opponents.

"As a result, moral integrity noticeably eroded, many prohibitions and red lines fell, the 'other' was violated without mercy, and excommunicatory fatwas emerged from all directions, stripping sanctity from adherents of different sects, legitimizing their defamation, cursing, and vilification."

The Hanbalis succeeded in gaining the sympathy and favor of Caliph Al-Mutawakkil, heralding the victory of the traditionalist Salafi school that opposed theological reasoning (rationalism). A new doctrinal framework was thus inaugurated, aiming to erase the remnants of the Mu'tazilite generation and elevate the banner of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah, represented by the hadith scholars and the "saved sect." The doctrine of the created nature of the Qur'an was replaced by its opposite—the belief in the Qur'an's eternal pre-existence.

"In the end, Caliph Al-Mutawakkil abolished the Mihna (Inquisition), dismissed Ibn Abi Du'ad from his position in 849 CE, and declared his belief in the eternity of the Qur'an (i.e., that the Qur'an is not created). Thus, the period of Mu'tazilite flourishing was confined to just twenty-two years."

Since the Mu'tazilites had a share of eloquence, they used poetry to spread their doctrine, embedding their beliefs within their extensive poetic compositions. Their prose and poetry aligned in defense of the ideology of the "victorious and saved sect." Many Arabic sources mention

Mu'tazilite poets and how they adorned the doctrine of the created Qur'an in their verses, much like Al-Sahib ibn Abbad (d. 385 AH), whose poetry expressed pure, unadulterated monotheism.

f some people say, "It is eternal because it is His speech," then see how high they have elevated it!

Likewise, the Christians say the same about Christ, And they have strayed from our religion, so they themselves have gone astray. Woe to them for their stubbornness, which led them to become Christians! And woe to them for their deceit, which led them to become Jews!

These verses illustrate that the Quran is created and not eternal. The claim of the eternity of God's speech is akin to the assertions of Christians and Jews. The Mu'tazilites interpreted and explained the Quranic text in a way that aligned with their doctrinal principles and theological constructs. Among the most famous exegeses of the Mu'tazila is the commentary of Jar Allah Al-Zamakhshari (d. 538 AH), which heavily relies on rhetoric. He weaves interpretations and explanations that support the boundaries of what is permissible and prohibited within the realm of faith and belief.

In his commentary on the verse from Surah Al-Isra regarding the divine challenge to humans to produce speech like that of God, the verse states:

"Say, 'If mankind and the jinn gathered together to produce the like of this Quran, they could not produce the like of it, even if they were assistants to one another.'" (Surah Al-Isra, 88)

Al-Zamakhshari interprets this verse as follows:

"If they joined forces to produce something equal to the Quran in its eloquence, coherence, and composition, even with the presence of the most fluent Arabs, the masters of rhetoric, they would still be unable to match it. What is astonishing is that some innovators claim that the Quran is eternal while simultaneously acknowledging its miraculous nature."

According to Al-Zamakhshari, this claim is contradictory. Those who assert that divine speech is eternal also admit that humans are incapable of producing speech like the Quran in its eloquence, metaphors, and style. The term "innovators" in his statement refers to the Sunni scholars of Hadith and jurisprudence, who upheld the doctrine of the eternity of divine speech rather than its creation. On one hand, they agree with the Mu'tazilites on the miraculous nature of the Quran, acknowledging that no human can produce anything like it in its rhetorical and linguistic excellence. Yet, at the same time, they reject the idea that the Quran is created and insist on its eternal existence alongside God.

It appears that religious authority has always sought to align itself with political power, and vice versa, in order to secure obedience to the ruler. The religious institution played a role in shaping religious doctrines, while the military institution ensured the continuation and defense of

the political and religious order. The Hadith-oriented faction, led by its spiritual leader, gained immense popularity both religiously and politically. Politics became the force that upheld power, preservation, and victory, serving as the stronghold that any sect seeking survival and expansion would seek refuge in.

The inner circle of Caliph Al-Ma'mun was dominated by Mu'tazilite scholars, including Thumama ibn al-Ashras (d. 213 AH), Abu al-Hudhayl al-Allaf (d. 226 AH), Al-Jahiz (d. 255 AH), Bishr al-Murisi (d. 218 AH), and Ahmad ibn Abi Du'ad, who were his close advisors and confidants. Al-Ma'mun was deeply influenced by the Mu'tazilite doctrine and became a staunch advocate of their beliefs. Ibn Kathir noted the impact of this theological influence, describing how Al-Ma'mun was led away from the truth and convinced to adopt the Mu'tazilite doctrine of the created Quran and the denial of God's attributes:

"A group of Mu'tazilites took control of him, leading him astray from the path of truth to falsehood. They adorned for him the belief in the creation of the Quran and the denial of God's attributes."

Historical sources almost unanimously agree that Bishr al-Murisi was the originator of the "Created Quran" doctrine, which he implanted in Al-Ma'mun's mind, making him a despised and condemned figure among the followers of Ibn Hanbal. The thinker Fahmi Jadaan, in his important study on the Mihna (Inquisition), pointed out that Bishr al-Murisi's ideas on the creation of the Quran had a significant presence in Al-Ma'mun's court. It is likely that Bishr provided Al-Ma'mun with theological arguments that reinforced the belief in the created Quran. This explains why Bishr was persistently targeted for condemnation by Hanbali scholars:

"There is no doubt that Bishr al-Murisi's ideas on the created Quran were strongly present in Al-Ma'mun's court. It is quite possible that Bishr provided Al-Ma'mun with some of the theological elements that supported this doctrine. This explains why Bishr, more than anyone else, remained the primary target of Hanbali condemnation."

The Mu'tazilites were not on good terms with representatives of other sects, whether Ash'arites or traditionalists (Ahl al-Hadith). Their opponents collectively accused them of heresy, misguiding the masses, and corrupting people's faith. The prominent Mu'tazilite scholar Al-Nazzam was vilified and declared an apostate by Sunni theologian Abdul Qahir al-Baghdadi, who compiled a list of 21 theological "scandals" against him, justifying his excommunication and disgrace:

"As for the books written by the Ahl al-Sunnah regarding his apostasy, only God can count them. Our teacher Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari authored three books on excommunicating Al-Nazzam, while Al-Qalansi wrote several works refuting him, and Judge Abu Bakr al-Baqillani composed a major book dismantling Al-Nazzam's principles. In his book Takfir al-Mu'awwileen ('Excommunication of the Interpreters'), he highlighted Al-Nazzam's deviations, making him one of the worst creatures of God on

earth due to his heretical beliefs and ideas that contradicted the Quran, Sunnah, and the path of the righteous predecessors."

Al-Nazzam was further denounced as one of the most immoral individuals, known for his indulgence in major sins and habitual consumption of intoxicants:

"Besides his heretical beliefs, Al-Nazzam was among the most immoral people of his time, fearless in committing great sins and constantly engaging in drunkenness."

It appears that anyone declared an adversary was subjected to vilification, defamation, and the meticulous recording of every flaw, even to the extent of fabricating accusations against them. Allegations of drinking alcohol, fornication, polytheism, and other vices were readily attributed to them. Al-Isfarayini (d. 471 AH) went so far as to declare a unanimous consensus among the scholars that the Mu'tazilites were heretics:

"For this reason, the scholars of truth and their leaders have unanimously agreed that the Mu'tazilite is, by default, an infidel."

He presented their views on divine attributes as entirely devoid of truth and accused them of deception in religious matters to evade persecution:

"Whoever holds such beliefs about the Creator and His attributes has no sound doctrine. Their claims of religiosity are mere deception, disguising themselves to escape the swords of Muslims that remain poised against them until the Day of Judgment."

Thus, their Islam was considered hypocrisy and deceit, hiding their true beliefs to ensure their safety. Al-Malti, a Shafi'i scholar, explicitly accused them of apostasy:

"Know that the Mu'tazilites have statements so abhorrent that I refrain from mentioning them, for they have deviated from the foundations of Islam into the branches of disbelief... I have refrained from detailing their views because of how appalling and vile they are. But God lies in wait for the unjust."

This presents an image of a politicized theology that instills fear in its opponents, whether commoners or elites. The name "Mu'tazila" became synonymous with a theological and political stance that shaped a collective identity, using excommunication, ostracization, and accusations of heresy as tools to delegitimize opponents.

It is a theology of wounds and destruction, not a theology of happiness and mercy. Thus, violence derived its legitimacy, spread, and was deemed acceptable, causing the spiritual, moral, and aesthetic essence of religion and faith to be lost. Consequently, criticism and diversity were assassinated in favor of sectarian arrogance and abhorrent Machiavellian political hypocrisy. However, it was believed that this would be of no benefit unless the other paths competing for God's vast mercy were also cut off. These paths had been narrowed down by sects, reducing them to a single gateway tailored to their own measures, through which they decided who was allowed

to enter and who was forbidden. They assigned a single key to this gate: their true creed and correct faith. Whoever sought salvation had to follow them, and whoever deviated from their doctrine was deemed a heretic, an innovator, and doomed to destruction.

"The problem with theological and jurisprudential education is that it instills beliefs and judgments that make those who embrace them feel superior to those who do not. The doctrines of the 'saved sect,' allegiance and disavowal, and the excommunication of those with different beliefs classify humanity hierarchically based on their religions. Such classification positions adherents of a particular faith as guardians over others, thereby eliminating any meaning of difference, pluralism, and diversity within society."

Conclusion

Even the House of Mu'tazila, which was adorned throughout history with the lamps of reason and contemplation—making them a prerequisite for knowing God—did not escape the sweeping darkness of excommunication and condemnation. Their openness to freedom of choice was also overwhelmed, and those lamps were extinguished in favor of the darkness of expulsion and exile for those who differed or exercised independent reasoning. This happened because their theological propositions were based on the doctrine of the 'saved sect,' eliminating any possibility of coexistence or rapprochement with opposing sects, which were considered among the doomed groups, deprived of divine mercy and stripped of salvation. Each sect interpreted prophetic statements as validating its own position, consolidating two conflicting prophecies: one of division, which served as divine justification for disagreement and fragmentation, thus legitimizing division within Islam, and another of exclusivity in salvation, which became a theological dilemma requiring deconstruction. At its core, this doctrine remained exclusionary because casting the other into hell necessitated their expulsion from the self's society and environment—making coexistence impossible. This inflated "self," nurtured within every theological school, was the driving force behind the bloody history of theological sects and the spread of sacred reverence within the Islamic mindset. Thus, the tree of tyranny grew with its three branches: [a closed identity], [a monopolized truth], and [an owned paradise]. If only the discourse of these sects had been as Al-Ash'ari introduced his treatise on sects:

"After their Prophet—peace be upon him—people differed on many issues, declaring one another misguided and disavowing each other, until they became distinct sects and divided factions. Yet Islam still unites them and encompasses them all."

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